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DAY-LABORER CENTER

Controversy Moves to Md.

Gaithersburg Officials Undeterred by Herndon Election Outcome

By NANCY TREJOS
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The electoral defeat of three Herndon politicians who supported a day-laborer center was perceived nationally as a warning to other elected officials. But in Gaithersburg, about 30 miles away, City Council members said they won't be deterred from opening their own facility.

Anti-illegal-immigration groups were emboldened by the outcome of Herndon's election. Some local activists said they saw Gaithersburg as a fertile battle ground to continue their fight against such centers, which seek to help immigrants — some of whom are illegal — find jobs.

"I don't respond to intimidation," City Council member Stanley J. Alster said. "We try to do the right thing. I try to do the right thing."

Yet even as politicians in Montgomery County promise to stand their ground, they have taken note of what happened in Herndon.

"I believe that people in the community are very concerned on both sides of the issue, and that's something the mayor and council of Gaithersburg need to discuss," Mayor Sidney A. Katz said.

On May 2, voters in Herndon unseated one-term Mayor Michael L. O'Reilly and two Town Council members who supported creating the day-laborer center. They were replaced by challengers who have proposed banning the use of taxpayer money for the facility. In addition, the conservative group Judicial Watch has sued Herndon over its decision to open a center.

"Hopefully, the Herndon example will ring a few bells in communities that seem to be a little harder of hearing," said Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a nonprofit group that wants to stop illegal immigration.

The head of the recently formed Maryland branch of the Minuteman Project said he has recruited about 100 members to patrol two other permanent day-laborer centers in Montgomery. The Minutemen spearheaded opposition in Herndon. The new Maryland chapter said it hopes to mobilize voters to unseat the County Council members who support the centers.

There is no election in Gaithersburg this year, but there are County Council and executive races. The County Council would have to approve funding for the new center.

"If there's anyone who supports this day-laborer center using taxpayers' money, we will oppose them," Stephen Schreiman, director of the Maryland Minutemen, said.

County Council members dis-



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missed such threats. Montgomery tends to be a liberal county, they say. Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans 2 to 1. And it's diverse: About 27 percent of its nearly 900,000 residents are foreign-born, according to the 2000 Census.

"I think they'll find their positions have no traction in Montgomery County," said County Council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), who is considering a bid for state Attorney General.

"Herndon is a significantly different community," said County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), who is running for reelection. "Most voters in Montgomery County have long ago come to terms with the fact that our demographics are changing and people are coming to our county."

The County Council has pushed for a day-laborer center in Gaithersburg for more than two years and has tentatively budgeted about \$120,000 in operating costs for it. City officials found a building and were ready to open the center last fall, but they reversed course because of residents' opposition. They formed a task force to make recommendations on how to deal with the dozens of men who gathered each morning at a parking lot next to Grace United Methodist Church to wait for work.

The City Council decided earlier this month to move ahead with plans for the center and now has turned its attention to the details of the project, which are also causing a stir.

At issue is whether CASA of Maryland, a nonprofit organization that has recently played a large role in organizing pro-immigration rallies, should manage the center. CASA already runs two centers for the county in Silver Spring and Wheaton and operates a temporary facility in Takoma Park.

The group has become a major player in immigration policies in

the county. As Montgomery's immigrant population has increased, it has turned to CASA to provide such services as English and computer courses and health care. Duncan included \$2 million for a wide range of CASA programs in his recommended fiscal 2007 budget. CASA has asked the County Council for \$700,000 more in community grants. The council will vote on the budget on Thursday.

But its critics say the 21-year-old group has become too politically active.

"There are concerns that CASA has too many other conflicting activities, and they're not in the best interest of the people and the county or even the people they serve," City Council member Michael A. Sesma said.

As a result, the City Council has decided to ask the county to seek bids for the contract to run the new center. That would depart from the county government's history of giving CASA contracts to run its centers without a bidding process.

Gaithersburg resident Prentiss Searles, who has opposed putting the center near a residential area, said he has concerns about CASA.

"They've got a national agenda," he said. "I think they're a dividing force right now. If you go in and identify a different group to run it, I

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"They've got a national agenda," he said. "I think they're a dividing force right now. If you go in and identify a different group to run it, I

think you'll get a lot of support from people."

Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA, said the group will probably enter the competition for the contract to run the center but will not change the way it conducts business.

"We are an organization that provides high-quality services and advocacy for our community," he said.

County Council members say they have received dozens of e-mail demands to stop financing CASA's activities, partly fueled by conservative radio talk shows. They said they will continue to support CASA.

"We don't limit people's political rights as a condition of accepting county funding," said County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville).

Baltimore last week abandoned plans to open a temporary day-laborer center run by CASA in the Washington Hill neighborhood after residents complained that it would be too close to their homes and an elementary school. City officials are now searching for another location, the Associated Press reported yesterday.



TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

Jeff Talley of Sterling and other Minuteman Project members fought a day-laborer center in Herndon last year.